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SUBJECT: OPPORTUNITIES AND PERILS FOR MINORITIES IN  
NATIONAL ELECTIONS

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    1B. 09 BAGHDAD 2758  
    1C. 09 BAGHDAD 2911

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Gary A. Grappo for Reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Christian political and religious leaders tell us that while they had hoped for more than a five-seat quota in the national elections law, they view March 7 elections as an opportunity to expand their representation and influence within the Parliament. In contrast, leaders of the Sabean-Mandeans, Shabak, and Yezidi communities have expressed concern that larger political blocs will try to "steal" their seats with candidates nominally from their communities, but actually loyal to the blocs. Regardless of the outcome, the inclusion of minority quotas in the national elections is likely to build on gains made throughout 2009 in expanding minority participation in Iraqi politics. END SUMMARY.

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MINORITIES IN THE ELECTION LAW  
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12. (C) The amendment to the national elections law that passed the Parliament on December 6 and will govern the national parliamentary elections scheduled for March 7 includes eight seats reserved for Iraq's minority communities, including five for Christians, one for Sabean-Mandeans, one for Yezidis and one for Shabaks. Of these eight reserved seats, the amendment stipulates that the five Christian seats be treated as a single district, meaning that Iraqis from across the country (and outside it) will be allowed to vote for their preferred candidate, regardless of where they reside. In contrast, voters for the remaining three seats are limited to a particular governorate -- Baghdad for the Sabean-Mandeans and Nineva for the Shabaks and Yezidis -- a difference that will impact the political calculus of these particular minority communities. The introduction of the minority quota system into the national elections law (a system that did not exist in the 2005 national parliamentary elections) builds on the precedent established in provincial and Kurdistan Region elections held during 2009. In those elections, minorities were elected to serve on the Provincial Councils of Baghdad (one Christian and one Sabean-Mandeans); Nineva (two Christians, one Shabak, nine Yezidis) and Basra (one Christian) as well as the Kurdistan Regional Parliament (six Christians, one Yezidi). In addition, one Christian also serves on the Provincial Councils of Dohuk and Kirkuk although the elections for these bodies took place in 2006.

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CHRISTIANS IN A STRONG POSITION  
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13. (C) The five-quota seats for Christians guarantees that the community's representation in the next Parliament will

double given that there are currently only two Christian MPs in the current COR. Nevertheless, some Christian leaders have complained that the demographic weight of their community should have entitled them to more guaranteed seats.

On December 15, Armenian Archbishop Avak Asadourian told the Ambassador and A/S Feltman that the Council of Bishops had formally petitioned the Parliament for a quota of 12 seats based on a calculation of one representative for every 100,000 Iraqi Christians believed to exist (ref A). On January 13, Fahmi Mansour, the head of the KRG-based Popular Council of Chaldeans, Syriacs and Assyrians (one of the two largest Christian political entities competing in the elections), told Poloff that his party had asked the Parliament for a quota of 15 seats. Poloff countered by pointing out that several Christian leaders are running for seats outside of the quota system with larger political entities such as State of Law (Prime Minister Wijdan Selim and PM advisor Georges Bakos), the Iraqi National Alliance (Khaled Mirza), and the Kurdish Democratic Party (George Kako), which could allow the Christian community to expand its representation beyond the quota of five members (ref B).

¶4. (C) No matter how many Christians are ultimately elected, their numbers are unlikely to give them significant influence on legislation in the 325-member Parliament. Nevertheless, Christian MP Yonadam Kanna (the head of the other large Christian political party, the Assyrian Democratic Movement) told Poloff on January 5 that the major benefit of having five members will be the ability to place Christians on all of the Parliamentary committees that impact their community, such as Education, which the two current MPs have been unable to cover alone. Both Kanna and Mansour predicted that their respective party would claim three of the five reserved

seats. Kanna told Poloff that he had maneuvered in Parliament to make the Christian seats a single Iraq-wide constituency vice multiple districts to prevent Mansour's party from easily claiming seats from the Kurdistan Region by asking its Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) allies to have some of its Muslim members vote for the Popular Council to swing the election. (COMMENT: One of the drawbacks of the quota system is that it does not ensure that only members of the protected community vote for that community's seats. In the July KRG elections, representatives of the Assyrian Democratic Movement complained that the KDP had instructed Muslim party members to vote for KDP loyal Christians. In fact, Shabak MP Hunein al-Qaddo told Poloff January 11 that he had warned Kanna not to make the Christian seats a single district because it was theoretically possible for the KDP to direct enough votes to the Popular Council to enable them to claim all five seats. END COMMENT.) Regardless of what the KDP decides to do, the creation of a single district for the Christian quota has increased the importance of out-of-country voting (OCV) in the election with both major Christian parties planning on campaigning actively during February in both neighboring countries and the United States.

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SABEAN-MANDEANS: GLASS AS HALF EMPTY

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¶5. (C) After months of lobbying Iraq's political leaders, Sabean-Mandeans leaders succeeded in their efforts to include a reserved seat for their community in the next Parliament (ref C). On December 30, Poloff met with three leaders of the Sabean-Mandeans community -- Mandeans Endowment Director Tomah Zahroon, Mandeans Council Secretary Hussein al-Zuhairy, and Ambassador Matheel al-Sabti -- to discuss the first election of a Mandeans to the national Parliament. Despite their appreciation for Embassy efforts to secure the Mandeans a seat in Parliament in spite of the small size of their community -- estimated at less than 10,000 persons -- the Mandeans leaders expressed frustration that their reserved seat would only appear on the ballot for Baghdad and not on ballots country-wide like the Christians. Zahroon asserted that 70 percent of the Mandeans community lived outside of Baghdad and that the law's stipulation that only voters in

Baghdad province could cast ballots for the Mandeans seat effectively disenfranchised those members of the community from selecting their own representative.

¶16. (C) Zuhairy said that the Mandeans community in Baghdad had nominated one candidate for the seat, Khaled Rumy, who had the blessing of its spiritual leader, Sheikh Sittar Hillo, and that the predominantly Shia coalition Iraqi National Alliance (INA) had pledged its support to get Rumy elected if he would side with its bloc in the next Parliament. The Mandeans leaders were all adamant that they would not ally with any larger political blocs and said that they had turned down the INA's offer, but were now afraid that the INA would capture the seat by assisting one of three other registered Mandeans candidates in exchange for INA support. To prevent this scenario from occurring, Zuhairy said that Mandeans leaders believe that Mandeans from across Iraq should be allowed to vote for the quota seat. They said they had taken their complaint to the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) as well as to UNAMI SRSG Melkert, but with no result. Now the Mandeans leaders plan to initiate an action in the courts on the grounds that the election law discriminated against the different minority groups in terms of its treatment of the reserved seats. Poloff commented that it was unlikely that the Parliament would be able to amend the election law at this time.

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SHABAKS AND YEZIDIS WARY OF KURDISH MACHINATIONS  
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¶17. (C) As with the Mandeans leaders, the current representatives of the Shabak and Yezidi communities within the Parliament have also expressed concern about larger political blocs targeting their seat. On January 11, Shabak MP Hunein al-Qaddo told Poloff that the INA had offered him the prospect of an alliance, but he had turned it down. Qaddo said that while the INA was running a Shabak candidate in Ninewa, his real concern was with the KDP-allied Shabak candidate. Qaddo asserted that the KDP was putting a lot of resources into this candidate and that he feared Kurdish voters in areas without Shabaks would be directed to vote for the KDP-candidate to make him the winner. Qaddo opined that if IHEC were fair, it would not allow votes for the Shabak seat from areas like Sinjar or Shaykhan where no Shabaks reside. He feared that local peshmerga forces in the disputed areas might deny him freedom of movement in order to carry out his campaign. On January 18, Yezidi MP Amin Farhan told Poloff that he too feared that his movement might be

restricted by the peshmerga and that he was also concerned that one of the candidates backed by the Kurds would succeed in capturing the Yezidi quota seat. Farhan said that he thought the presence of the peshmerga in all of the Yezidi areas of Ninewa would naturally tilt the vote toward the Kurdish-backed candidates.

¶18. (C) COMMENT: The fact that many of Iraq's major political factions have reached out to minority communities to expand their influence in the next Parliament is an encouraging sign that minorities are being drawn into the political process. However, Iraq's minority communities also face the prospect of not having their preferred candidates elected by making a principled (but perhaps foolhardy) stand against making election alliances. Regardless of who is elected, the expansion of the number of minorities who will serve in the next Parliament should further cement gains that have been made over the past year to ensure that Iraq's minority communities have a political voice. The political impact of those gains will only become clearer with the results, which will indicate whether minorities have gotten their preferred candidates into office or were overrun by the big alliances.

END COMMENT.

HILL